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An Empirical Study on Women from the 'One-Child' Generation and Their Higher Education Participation in Contemporary China

Abstract

This article explores the changing dynamics between gender, cultural capital and the state in the context of higher education expansion in contemporary China. With a particular focus on the One-Child generation and women's opportunities and aspirations, I draw upon empirical evidence from a first-hand survey study and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female undergraduates from one-child families in 2007. The study's findings suggest singleton status might mediate the impact of socioeconomic status and cultural capital on students' academic performance and elite opportunities. The qualitative interview data provide further evidence on how singleton women's aspirations are related to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The most significant finding concerns singleton girls' strategy of applying for Chinese Communist Party membership as a way to minimize their social and gender disadvantages. I argue that a bottom-up approach of women empowerment is emerging through qualifications and political selection during China's transition. Political selection is dressed up in seemingly meritocratic selection, thus becoming more appealing to female undergraduates who, in turn, take advantage of Party membership to add a silver lining of political loyalty to higher education qualifications.

Keywords: One-Child Policy, gender, state, cultural capital, higher education, China

Introduction

Women around the world have experienced remarkable opportunities in the past two decades. Higher education opportunities have increased massively (Marginson 2016), with increasing representation by women. UNESCO data show that women's participation in tertiary education increased from less than 10 per cent in 1970 to around 30 per cent in 2008 (UNESCO 2010). Meanwhile, women in China also have had more opportunities in higher education. While less than 30 per cent of women in China participated in higher education in 1980, this figure rose to 50 per cent in 2013 (NBSC 1980, 2014). Existing research on gendered opportunities in China highlights the role of economic human development as well as modernisation in equalizing opportunities for women. We know that individual families tend to invest more in their children's education as they gain more economic resources (Hannum 2005; Forsythe et al. 2000). We also know that the gender gap in education participation and attainment reduces as the economy grows both in urban and rural China (Hannum 2005; Zheng et al. 2002; Buchmann and Hannum 2001). However, we know very little about the changing role of the state in mediating gender inequality. This is particularly relevant since the state has played an important role in women's empowerment in China's recent history.

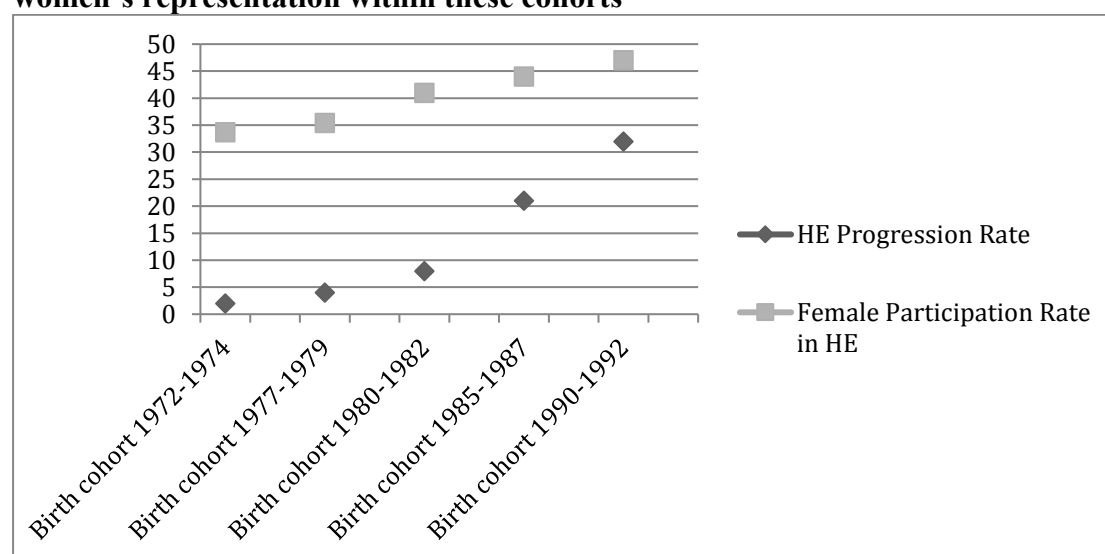
Socialist China before 1978 was committed rhetorically and ideologically to gender equality at every level of society. This was perceived as an integral process of Socialist formation (Wolf 1985; Johnson 1983). Following Mao Zedong's famous slogan, 'Women Holding up Half of the Sky,' the legislation on gender equality and even the 'pro-women laws' (Zheng 2005:520) were subsequently proposed and supported by the powerful state to allow women to be fully engaged in politics and state agencies in all sectors (Qi 1999; Stacey 1983). This unique process of state intervention in the empowerment of women, argued to be the result of a Socialist patriarch (Young 1999; Stacey 1983), was consistent with Socialist egalitarianism and the ideology of equality.

Yet, market reform since 1978 fundamentally altered the dynamics of the role of the state in mediating gender relations in the new market economy. The new political priority has shifted towards market-oriented reforms and economic modernization (Liu 2016). There were two subsequent changes in social policy, which had great

implications on women's opportunities. The first concerns the change in the demographic policy – namely the implementation of the One-Child policy around 1980, which was terminated in October 2015. This policy was integral to the state's modernization strategy as the state aimed to curb the rapid population growth at the time to avoid a 'Malthusian collapse'¹ and to prioritise economic development (Liu 2016).

The second change is more broadly related to the massive expansion of higher education opportunities since the 1990s, which has attracted increasing numbers of male and female students across urban and rural China (Liu 2016). The gross enrolment ratio increased from 3.1 per cent in 1990 to over 23.32 per cent in 2010 (World Bank 2015). By 2013, nearly a third of secondary school graduates were enrolled in higher education and 50 per cent of new enrolments were women (NBSC 2015). Figure 1 further illustrates the scale of the expansion of higher education by comparing the two birth cohorts before the One-Child policy and three cohorts from the One-Child generation.

Figure 1: The progression rates of selected birth cohorts and the percentage of women's representation within these cohorts



Source: NBSC (1980, 1986, 1991, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2007)

The former includes the 1972-1974 cohort and the 1977-1979 cohort. The One-Child generation refers to those who were born after the implementation of the policy, and includes the 1980-1982 cohort, the 1985-1987 cohort, and the 1990-1992 cohort. The data show that the progression rates into higher education for the first two birth cohorts were very much lower – around 2 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively. Around 8 per cent of the 1980-1982 birth cohort was enrolled by 2000. There was a

significant increase in the progression rate for the birth cohort 1985-1987, which rose to 21 per cent around the mid-2000s. Another significant rise was shown in the progression rate of 31 per cent for the birth cohort 1990-1992 enrolled in higher education around 2010.

The difference in women's representation in higher education between the pre-One-Child generation and the One-Child generation is also significant. For those born before the policy in 1980, women accounted for less than 30 per cent of the total higher education population; that is, men had twice as much representation in higher education than women. For the One-Child generation, women's participation in higher education increased to 41 per cent for the 80-82 cohort, then to 44 per cent for the 85-87 cohort and to nearly 50 per cent for the 90-92 cohort. While it can be argued that the expansion of China's higher education contributed to a growth of opportunities across all social groups, it is clear the One-Child policy marked a steady increase in women's participation in higher education.

However, we have yet to establish in detail how women from the One-Child generation are affected by socio-political and economic circumstances in relation to opportunities and aspirations. This article, therefore, is designed to examine the changing dynamics between the state, the individual family and gendered opportunities in the context of the expansion of higher education since the late 1990s. The particular focus of this article will be tracing the birth cohorts whose life courses have coincided with the introduction of the One-Child policy and the expansion of higher education opportunities. This article, which is strongly empirical in character, will address two main questions: 1) What have women from the One-Child generation achieved in higher education regarding academic performance and participation in types of universities? 2) How are their aspirations affected by family characteristics and socio-political circumstances?

Conceptual framework: gender and state in the Chinese context

Existing literature chronicles two patterns of the relationships between gender and the state. In light of the rise of the welfare state in Nordic countries after World War II, women's civic rights and their political and economic participation have resonated deeply in the state's commitment to gender equality in the cultural shift as well as in the legislation of equal opportunities (Borchorst 2008; Bergqvist et al. 1999; Stetson and Mazur 1995). Studies on post-Communist transitions among Eastern European countries complement the second dimension of research on gender and the state.

Scholarship argues that women were disadvantaged during the transitions when employment opportunities declined substantially as a result of the privatization of state industries, and that the patriarchal Socialist state was dressed up as a new modern welfare state, which provided unfavourable redistributive welfare policies (Gheaus 2008; Emigh et al. 2001; Havelkova 2000).

Both strands of literature highlight how changing socio-political and economic circumstances in the Nordic and Eastern European countries have shaped gendered opportunities. However, many unanswered questions remain in the research on relations between gender and state during China's transition to a market economy after 1978. Existing research on the female labour force in China shows that women have lost out in terms of earning potential and employment security against male workers during the period of market reform (Ding et al. 2009; Cao and Hu 2007). We also know that there has been a decline in women pursuing ambitious job opportunities and promotions in urban China during the privatization of state-owned enterprises (Liu 2015; Ding et al. 2009; Hanser 2005). However, much less is known in detail about how the shift in the state's political priority from egalitarianism to modernization is linked to changing opportunities and aspirations for women and how women are affected by social factors, such as demographic policy and the expansion of educational opportunities.

The One-Child Policy and the State's Modernisation Strategy

Since 1978 the state's political priority has shifted towards implementing market reforms and developing a modernised society (Liu 2016; Murphy 2014; Goodman 2014). Central to the state's modernisation strategy was demographic reform with the introduction of the One-Child policy² (Potts 2006; Greenhalgh 2003). The rationale for facilitating a strictly enforced birth quota among individual families was to deal with overpopulation, an issue that not only concerned the Chinese Communist Party (Yang 2007) but also lay at the heart of the Chinese people (Moore 1966). In his seminal book on *Social Origins of Democracy*, Moore (1966) argues that the overpopulation of rural peasants during the 18th and 19th century was one of the key reasons for China's failure to modernise and develop a democratic system.

The implementation of this policy has a number of consequences, some long-term, some more immediate. The immediate consequence is a dramatic decline in the fertility rate. The urban fertility rate dropped from 3.27 in 1970 to 1.15 in 1980, a year after the implementation of this strict policy (Cai 2010); the total birth rate reduced

from 2.9 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2004, with a rate of 1.3 in urban areas, and under 2.0 in rural regions (Hesketh et al. 2005). It is estimated that the One-Child policy has curbed the population growth by more than 400 million since 1979 (Yang 2007). The long-term effect would be an insufficient supply of prime human labour due to the ageing population, which is expected to have an impact on the momentum of economic growth (Liu 2015).

A large body of sociological research further examines the implications of the One-Child policy on women's opportunities and aspirations. Some argue that the policy represents a drastic intervention by the state in family planning, particularly in terms of controlling women's fertility choices, which could potentially violate human rights and distort the gender balance in the population, as many families abort girls (Peng 2013; Ebstein 2010; Fong 2004). Another line of inquiry has found that a lower fertility rate is correlated strongly with higher female labour force participation, thus arguing that the low fertility has reduced women's reproduction burden and entailed fewer responsibilities in childcare (OECD 2012; Lim 2000).

Studies at the individual family level complement a larger body of work on the changing demographic policy on women's opportunities and aspirations. Research demonstrates a shift in parental values and perceptions through investment plans in education and engagement with their children's study (Kim et al. 2016; Kim and Fong 2014; Wang and Fong 2009; Fong 2004, 2002; Tsui and Rich 2002). There used to be the situation where large families invested little in each child or prioritized their resources in favor of sons. This pattern has been replaced with small families investing heavily in their only child (Tan 2012; Wang and Fong 2009; Hannum et. al 2009), particularly among urban families' investment in girls (Kim and Fung 2014; Tsui and Rich 2002: 90). It is further argued that the unintended consequence of the One-Child policy is the weakening of traditional patriarchal values in Chinese society as well as achieving high aspirations among urban girls (Liu 2016, 2015; Kim et al. 2016; Fong 2004).

This particular context raises some questions concerning parental cultural capital and its impact on students' aspirations. Research in Western societies, for instance, shows that students' aspirations are developed through internalizing their cultural capital, which varies from different social origins (Archer et al. 2013; Jackson et al. 2008; Bae et al. 2000). Theories of cultural capital and habitus have been developed to capture the impact of inequality of cultural capital on different patterns of students'

aspirations and expectations (Dumais, 2002; Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990; Bourdieu 1983: 243).

Female students of high socioeconomic status are more likely to have higher aspirations, record better achievements and make more ambitious choices in male-dominated fields of study, such as computer science, engineering and physical science than their working class counterparts (Archer et al. 2013; Jackson et al. 2008; Bae et al. 2000). The concepts of embodied and objective cultural capital are extended to East Asian contexts such as Japan and South Korea to measure the impact of family activities, cultural acquisition (embodied capital) and cultural possessions (objectified capital) on children's academic achievement and aspirations (Byun et al. 2012; Yamamoto and Brinton 2010). However, the Chinese context raises the question about how to understand the impact of parental cultural capital and socioeconomic status on their daughters' aspirations and expectations with these particular demographic characteristics.

The State, Expansion of Higher Education and Political Selection

The expansion of higher education is an important chapter in the story of the state's modernization strategy. The state's ambition to become the world leader in science and technology has driven the rapid development of the higher education system since 1980 (Liu 2016, 2013). With the mass enrolment in higher education, the state has also shifted its role in political mobilization of the elite population. During the Socialist regime, the state mobilized university students and empowered students-turned 'Red Guards' through nationwide political campaigns and ideological manipulation (Seybolt 2016; White 2014). This mass recruitment approach has shifted, partly because of the Tiananmen Square protests on June 4, 1989, to the strategy of meritocratic selection, through which the Party can be seen as taking a ground-breaking step away from political selection based purely on ideology (Liu 2016, 2013).

Political selection has therefore been dressed up in meritocracy, which has a wider appeal among university students. Meanwhile, great value has been attached to Party membership, particularly when it comes to employment opportunities in the public sector or further education prospects (Walder 2009, 2006). Party membership thus functions as a passport for progression into professional jobs and graduate schools. Selection into Party membership is based on political as well as academic criteria.

Students who aspire to be Chinese Communist Party members are required to demonstrate consistent excellence in academic performance and engagement in political activities organized by the Party branch at each university (Liu 2016). Selection is so competitive that only a small number of applications are approved annually, and the majority are either turned down or placed on the list of Party member candidates (the *yubei dangyuan*). Even in the case of successful application, students are scrutinized during a probation period of 12 months (Liu 2016).

The state's project of expanding higher education has provided tremendous opportunities for the One-Child generation. We have known that the state has shifted its strategy of political engagement with university students. We have also known that individual families have invested in their only child's education opportunities and aspirations. Yet, we still do not know how we can extend the cultural capital thesis to understand women's aspirations in the Chinese context; about how an individual family's demographic characteristics would interact with cultural capital in terms of affecting women's aspirations; and how the state's new strategy of political engagement in higher education would affect women's aspirations. Therefore, this research asks a number of questions relating to: 1) patterns of participation and achievements by women from One-Child families, 2) their aspirations and expectations, as well as the strategies they have adopted to achieve their goals in higher education.

Data and methodology

This research adopts a mixed-method approach. It consists of a quantitative survey of 858 undergraduates (RQ 1), supplemented by 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female students from single-child families, which are qualitative (RQ 2). The survey study and interviews were conducted in two eastern provinces in China in 2007. The questionnaire was designed to obtain first-hand data on the birth cohort whose life course coincides with the introduction of the One-Child Policy and the expansion of higher education opportunities. The surveyed students were born between 1987 and 1989, a period during which the One-Child reform was enforced across China. The research population was recruited to higher education in 2007 when access to the sector increased dramatically. Hence, by collecting data on this particular cohort, I was able to examine the impact of the demographic and education policy on gendered participation in higher education.

This research adopts a random sampling strategy; that is, students were randomly selected from different types of universities and fields of study. I visited eight universities across two provinces in East China after these institutions gave ethical approval and confirmation to proceed with the study. These institutions include two elite universities, two key universities, two comprehensive universities and two vocational institutions. I recruited students from three main channels. First, I approached students in the canteens, food stalls and cafes on campus in these eight institutions. Second, I was supported by my contacts in these universities to approach students involved in activities organized by the Youth League and the Party office. Third, the use of social media websites and applications such as QQ complemented my search for an eligible research population. During the first stage of this study, I delivered questionnaires to 858 undergraduates alongside my colleagues. Those who expressed interest in participating in the follow-up interviews were subsequently contacted.

The design of the questionnaire survey elicits information on both independent and dependent variables to investigate how singleton status affects one's chances of access to higher education and one's destinations in types of institutions. The former includes demographic status (singleton or non-singleton origin) and other social characteristics, including socioeconomic status, parental educational level, cultural capital (embodied and objective forms), geographical origins, gender and types of schooling. The last mentioned includes students' academic performance in the National Entrance Examinations – the *Gaokao* – as well as their destinations in types of institutions.

Socioeconomic status uses Lu Xueyi's classification of eight socioeconomic groups developed in his study on the contemporary workforce in China (Lu 2010) and is modified into four categories, including managerial background, professional background, working class, and agricultural workers' background. Parental education level is coded as: higher education degrees (including the *Dangxiao*³ degrees); completed senior secondary school or vocational, technical secondary school; less than secondary schooling; and less than primary schooling.

Cultural capital was measured by embodied capital and objectified capital. The former includes hours spent on extra-curricular activities such as visits to museums, attendances at theaters and reading activities during the previous year; the latter combined the number of cultural possessions such as books/CDs/DVDs and musical

instruments/paintings. A series of socio-demographic characteristics will also be considered, including geographical origins and types of secondary schooling. Geographical origin is categorized as either urban or rural. Types of schooling include model/key schools and regular secondary schools.

Individual, in-depth interviews followed up the survey study to probe questions relating to detailed aspirations and expectations of female students from one-child families that could not be addressed so well through a quantitative survey. The interviewees were selected from a variety of social backgrounds. The interview questions drew narratives from the respondents on: 1) the aspirations and expectations they have as the only child in the family; and 2) the strategies they have adopted to achieve their aspirations in higher education. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English and analysed using NVivo.

Findings from the survey study

Table 1 provides detailed information of the surveyed students' socioeconomic, cultural and demographic characteristics, with reference to the national population, where applicable. Singleton girls refer to surveyed female undergraduates who are from one-child families, whilst non-singleton students refers to those surveyed students who had at least one sibling in the family. Students whose parents had more than senior secondary schooling represented 52.5 per cent of participants in higher education. Those from managerial and professional families accounted for 35.1 per cent of participants, while working class students and those from agricultural families represented around 25.5 and 39.4 per cent, respectively. Compared to the general working class and those from the agricultural class, students from the bottom socioeconomic strata were still under-represented in higher education.

Table 1: Socioeconomic, cultural and demographic characteristics of the surveyed population by male, female and singleton female

	Surveyed population (percentage in the whole population is in parenthesis)	Male	Female	Singleton Female
<i>Socioeconomic status</i>				
Managerial class	21.7 (8.4)	7.4	14.3	8.6
Professional class	13.4	4.8	8.6	11.2

	(5.1)			
Working class	25.5 (39.4)	12.2	13.3	5.6
Agricultural working class	39.4 (47.1)	21.3	18.1	1.7
<i>Parental education</i>				
Higher education	11.8 (6.22)	5.2	6.6	6.6
Completed senior secondary schooling	40.6 (12.92)	18.3	22.3	15.9
Less than secondary schooling	35.6 (72.07)	15.1	20.5	4.3
Less than primary education	12.0 (8.79)	7.1	4.9	0.3
Cultural capital	Observed range			
Objectified cultural capital: possessions of books/CDs/DVDs, musical instruments/paintings)	1-6	3.71	4.22	4.67
Embodied cultural capital: activities (hours spent on the visits to museums/concerts/cinema)	0-16	7.11	9.50	12.03
<i>Residency status</i>				
Urban	60.6	24.4	36.2	26.5
Rural	39.4	21.9	17.5	1.6
<i>Schooling</i>				
Key schools	40.1	13.6	26.5	17.6
Normal schools	59.9	27.6	32.3	9.5

Source: Data on socioeconomic status at the national level came from Lu 2010; data on the parental educational level came from NBSC 2008.

Urban students had twice as much representation as those from rural areas. Students from key schooling backgrounds were favoured in the selection, given that the key schools accounted for only around 20 per cent of the total number of state schools (Liang and Lee 2012). There were more female students than males from managerial and professional backgrounds. However, there was also significant participation of rural female students in higher education, accounting for 18.1 per cent of total participants compared to 21.3 per cent in the case of their male counterparts. Female students whose parents had more than senior schooling were slightly more

likely to go to university. The majority of singleton female students came from reasonably well educated families and disproportionately came from urban areas.

In terms of the cultural capital measure, students whose parents had higher education degrees and had completed senior secondary schooling possessed more culture and had been more active in cultural participation than those whose parents had had less than secondary schooling. Furthermore, cultural measures were also significant in socioeconomic differences. Students from managerial and professional backgrounds participated in more cultural activities than those from working class and agricultural families.

Cultural measures were most significant in the rural-urban divide. Students from urban areas had a higher level of cultural participation and possession than those from rural areas. The type of schools did not differ very much in terms of cultural possession, but a distinction was evident in cultural activities. The gender gap in cultural measures was not very significant, which might be related to the fact that surveyed students had already been selected for higher education. Singleton girls, in particular, have much higher measures of cultural capital than the rest of the group.

Table 2 presents the odds ratio of achieving the highest academic performance and being accepted in elite and key universities among the surveyed population. The best academic performance was measured by a threshold of 560 points out of a total of 750 points in the 2007 National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*). Those who obtained 560 points or higher were considered as achieving high academic performance. Those who were accepted in either elite (985 institutions) or key (211 institutions) were considered to have achieved better destinations in higher education than those in provincial vocational and technological universities.

Table 2: Odds ratio of achieving highest thresholds in the *Gaokao* and being enrolled in elite and key universities by the surveyed population

	Odds ratio of high performance in the <i>Gaokao</i>	Odds ratio of being enrolled in elite/key universities
<u>Socioeconomic status</u> (Ref: agricultural and peasants families)		
Managerial class	0.74***	1.16***
Professionals	1.03***	1.14***

Working class	0.85	0.67
<u>Parental educational level</u> (Ref: less than schooling level)		
Higher education degree	1.31***	1.69 ***
Completed secondary schooling	0.84**	0.92**
Less than secondary schooling	0.61	0.49
<u>Residency</u> (Ref: the rural areas)		
Urban areas	1.72***	1.89***
<u>Senior secondary schooling</u> (Ref: regular schools)		
Model/key schools	1.58***	1.67***
N	858	858

*0.10 **0.05. ***0.01 two tailed tests.

This shows that the effect of socioeconomic status and parental education level is significant. The odds of achieving high academic performance and elite opportunities were much higher for those from managerial and professional families and those whose parents had more than senior secondary schooling. Equally, the effect of geographical origin and types of schooling was strong in predicting the likelihood of both achievements. Those students from urban areas and from key schools had greater odds of achieving the highest thresholds and going to elite universities than those from rural areas and from normal state schools.

Table 3 further measures the odds ratio of the singleton girls in terms of achieving the highest academic performance and being accepted in elite and key universities compared to the rest of the surveyed population. The singleton effect is significant in predicting the odds ratio of high achievement in the *Gaokao* and elite opportunities. Singleton female status had a strong effect – 21 per cent higher odds of achieving the highest performance in the 2007 *Gaokao* than non-singleton females, as well as singleton and non-singleton males. Similarly, singleton female status had a strong effect – 27% higher odds of being accepted by elite and key universities than

their counterparts. This result suggests that singleton status might mediate the effect of socioeconomic status and cultural capital in higher education selection in China.

Table 3: Odds ratio of singleton girls in achieving highest thresholds in the *Gaokao* and being enrolled in elite and key universities compared to the non-singleton girls

	Odds ratio of high performance in the <i>Gaokao</i>	Odds ratio of participation in elite and key universities
<i>Demographic status</i>		
Non-singleton students (a)		
Singleton girls	1.21***	1.27***

Notes: a. Non-singleton students are the reference category.

*** 0.01 one tailed test.

Findings from the interview data

The in-depth individual interviews provide further narratives from singleton women on their aspirations in relation to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds as well as strategies they have employed to navigate through the severe competition in higher education. Table 4 provides a detailed profile of the interviewees. The girls' identity was anonymized and coded as SG1-24. Due to intercultural differences in the concept of aspirations in Chinese and English, a number of coding strategies were tested to identify the key themes regarding women's aspirations and expectations. Two themes emerged from the coded interview transcriptions. They were 'a professional career' and 'graduate schools' (these are the English terms for the Chinese 'bailing' (白领) and 'kaoyan' (考研), respectively). Two aspiration themes will be analyzed further in relation to the socioeconomic and cultural pattern of aspirations, source of aspirations and strategies acquired to achieve goals.

Table 4: Detailed profile of female students from the One-Child families

	Girls from the 'One-Child' Families
Total number of interviewees	24
Socioeconomic status	
Managerial and professional class	16
Working class	7
Agricultural families	1
Parental Ed	
Higher education	6
Secondary schooling	17
Less than secondary schooling	1
Elite universities	6
Key universities	14
Vocational institutions	4

STEM fields	4
Arts, humanities and social sciences	20
Career aspiration of being in a professional job 5 years after graduation	22(out of 24) 91.7%
Academic aspiration of going to graduate schools after graduation	17 (out of 24) 70.8%

First, there was a general pattern of high career and academic aspirations among the singleton girls interviewed, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. A total of 22 out of 24 girls indicated they planned to be in a professional job within five years of graduation. Seventeen out of 24 discussed detailed plans to pass the selection examinations and go to graduate schools. As mentioned in the previous quantitative analysis, singleton girls were more likely to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and urban areas. Sixteen of 24 interviewees were from managerial or professional families. These 16 girls spoke confidently about their aspirations to advance academically and seek professional occupations.

The relations between gender aspirations and social backgrounds were further analyzed from the data, which included interviews with seven girls from working class families and one from a rural agricultural background. All eight girls expressed strong academic and career aspirations. Moreover, six out of eight girls from less privileged backgrounds discussed their ambition to pursue elite opportunities (for example, ‘a postgraduate place in Fudan University (a top university in China)’ or ‘a leadership role in my future career’). The number of interviewees was relatively small; however, there was no clear evidence that singleton girls from working class and agricultural families had less aspiration or ambition than those from professional or managerial families.

Second, the singleton girls were asked in detail about their source of aspirations and reasons for aspiring to their role models. The source of aspirations, the key influencers or those who shaped the girls’ aspirations, included accomplished female seniors from the same university and leading female figures from China and abroad, who had excelled in science, politics, the arts and business (for example, Marie Curie, Yang Lan and Wu Yi). Senior female students from the same department or fields of study appeared to be the girls’ ‘immediate’ or ‘direct’ role models, which can be interpreted as the alumni impact. For example, SG7 mentioned that a female senior from the same Department of Law was her ‘*idol*’ because this senior ‘*passed the highly competitive graduate examinations and was offered a place to pursue a*

Masters in Law at Fudan University', one of the elite universities and most prestigious law schools in China. Another example was SG19, who strongly expressed her admiration of her senior from the same Department of Foreign Languages because this female senior passed '*successive oral and written interviews*' and '*got a job as a bilingual interpreter in an international company in Shanghai*'.

Another pattern emerged in the singleton girls' recognition of 'empowering female figures', which seemed to have had a strong influence on their aspirations. For instance, SG2, who was one of few singleton girls who majored in Chemistry, said Marie Curie had always been her source of inspiration. She drew some parallels between the 'empowering Curie' and herself:

"Madam Curie did not come from a rich family and she was an immigrant. I am a child of a migrant worker and we moved to the city (Hangzhou) when I was little. I went through a lot of prejudices. I could only imagine Madam Curie must have overcome millions more. Madam Curie's determination and strength made her the Nobel Laureate twice so I believe I can reach my dream as long as I am driven and hard working. Actually I have achieved my first dream of going to university and I will aim higher."

Interestingly, there was not much evidence of a connection between students' aspirations and parental occupational status, which is contrary to other studies (Archer et al. 2013). Two respondents from professional backgrounds elaborated on the 'disconnect' between their aspirations and parental occupations. They both aspired to their mothers' professional status (respectively, as a 'chief pediatrician' in a public hospital and a 'head teacher' of a primary school) but did not wish to pursue the same professions. When asked for an explanation, SG11, whose mother is a chief pediatrician, answered:

'Chemistry was my weakest subject in high school. Without an excellent track record in Chemistry, no medical schools would accept me. I am interested in creativity and arts so I chose Media Studies. I think I need to choose a profession where my talents do not blindly follow my mother's footsteps.'

The other girl also explained the 'disconnect' due to her interests and mathematical skills. SG13 expressed tremendous respect for her mother's profession but stressed how she needed to find her own feet:

‘I have a lot of respect for teachers. I would love to be in the teaching profession. However, I am interested in numbers. My teachers all said I have exceptional skills in mathematics. That’s why I chose Accounting, which I believe will also lead to a good professional job. This might not be a profession as inspiring as my mum’s but I need to find my own feet.’

This finding confirms findings from previous research that students might make university choices to retain the same socioeconomic status (Thomsen et al. 2013; Breen and Goldthorpe 1999). However, the narratives from the singleton girls’ do not suggest a direct correspondence between their aspirations and parental professions.

Third, singleton girls have developed different strategies to maximize their chances in academic and career pursuits, including enrolling in intensive summer courses and seeking internship opportunities. However, the most common strategy of progressing academic and career goals was to join the Communist Party. It is evident that most singleton girls adopted the strategy of seeking Party membership to achieve their post-graduate study and career aspirations. Twenty-three out of 24 singleton girl students have already submitted their applications to become members of the Chinese Communist Party. It appeared that most singleton girls from all social backgrounds regarded Party membership as an advantage in accessing academic and professional opportunities (for example, *‘being a Party member gives you advantages in getting into graduate school or a good job’*). S2 addressed the subtle advantage of Party membership from her senior’s experience of job hunting:

‘She (her senior) graduated with the first honours and was shortlisted for a job at a pharmaceutical company. However, she was rejected and another candidate was offered the job. The other candidate is a Party member with first honours. I guess a graduate with Party membership is more trustworthy than the others, since it is a kind of elite selection at university. That’s why I submitted my Party membership application last semester to get a head start.’

The girls from working class or agricultural families used Party membership as a way of mitigating social and gender disadvantages. For example, SG16 mentioned: *‘I don’t have the guanxi (contacts) like the others. Party membership is the only way to get connected and be given privileged opportunities.’* S14’s narratives illustrated a

powerful interpretation of hidden inequality behind the general rosy picture of women's participation in higher education:

'Going to university does not mean that you are as good as boys. Sadly, we still live in a very traditional society where men seem to have superior status than women. The competition only starts when you are in university. No matter how many 90 points you achieve (A or a First), you are still a woman. 90 points will not guarantee a good job opportunity because the employers or bosses are generally men so they favour male candidates both in the public and business sector. So, I decided to join the Party. Party membership will appear to be more trustworthy even when I am a woman.'*

Regarding the application procedure, it seemed the process of screening the candidates was lengthy and meticulous. According to the interviewees, the main selection criteria used during the *kaocha* (the screening process) included 'good/excellent political quality' (SG23), 'promising political and academic potential' (SG8), 'consistent and active involvement in Party activities' (SG1). SG23 mentioned that she had conducted thorough research on the Party's latest agenda and ideology propaganda to demonstrate how she had good political sense or quality in preparing her application letter. SG8 highlighted her excellent academic performance in the entrance examinations as well as her top performance in class to make herself an attractive candidate. SG1, on the other hand, had been proactive and engaged in several Party seminars held at the department branch in order to 'be seen' by Party recruiters.

When asked about the implications of preparing for Party membership and being a candidate, the respondents seemed to develop rather positive attitudes. SG5 regarded the lengthy scrutinizing process as 'an incentive to perform well' in her academic pursuits and saw this as a "win-win" scenario once she 'gains Party membership' and 'achieves good grades'. SG1 saw this opportunity as a 'transitional preparation for entering society' because being engaged in a political community in university would help improve her communication, organization, writing and social skills because the Party branch in her department held regular seminars, debates and self-reflective writing.

Discussion and conclusion

This article is a modest attempt to explore the changing dynamics between gender, cultural capital and the state in the context of higher education participation in contemporary China. In particular, it highlights the women from the One-Child generation and explores their academic achievements and aspirations in relation to changing demographic policy and family values. There are several findings, some of which are related to extending cultural capital to understand gendered opportunities in the context of the One-Child generation, and some of which are concerned with relations between gender and the state in the Chinese context.

First, there was a clear pattern of high academic performance and participation in elite universities by women from One-Child families. The statistical analysis suggests singleton status might mediate the impact of socioeconomic status and cultural capital on students' academic performance and elite opportunities. The evidence from the study contests the cultural capital argument on the rigid correspondence between social class, cultural capital and students' higher education attainment. The demographic characteristics of the One-Child generation might interrupt the social reproduction between socioeconomic status, cultural capital and the children's subsequent education attainment and aspirations.

Second, qualitative interview data provide further evidence on how singleton women's aspirations are related to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and what strategies they employ to navigate through the higher education competition. The singleton girls' narratives reveal a pattern of generally high aspirations, regardless of their class and cultural backgrounds. The most significant finding concerns singleton girls' strategies to achieve their expectations and goals in university. Their narratives clearly acknowledge the hidden inequality towards women in higher education. By applying for Chinese Communist Party membership they hope to minimize their social and gender disadvantages, enhance their academic and social skills, extend their contacts and networks and prepare for further academic and career pursuits.

The interview data also reveal changing relations between gender and the state. Top-down state intervention in women's empowerment during the Socialist era was replaced with a bottom-up approach of empowerment through qualifications and political selection. The State orchestrated a massive expansion of higher education opportunities, which were made available particularly for women from the One-Child generation. Furthermore, Party membership and its associated value have become

particularly attractive to aspiring female undergraduates. Political selection is thus dressed up in a seemingly meritocratic selection process with political loyalty. By using Party membership and rigorous selection, the State has comfortably managed the elite population. The female students also take advantage of Party membership to minimize the impact of gender inequality. This strengthens their academic advantage and adds a silver lining of political loyalty to their higher education qualifications.

It can be argued that contextual factors, such as political capital (Party membership) and demographic characteristics might mediate the influence of a family's socioeconomic status and cultural capital. Party membership and singleton demographic status seem to have a neutralizing effect on rigid social reproduction through higher education in the Chinese context. Altogether, the analysis shows a complex array of contextual factors mediating the effects of cultural capital on student progression through education and into work, which need to be taken into account alongside traditional socioeconomic and cultural characteristics in researching transitions in the sociology of education.

Notes

¹ The term refers to uncontrolled population growth that eventually surpasses growth in the food supply and leads to a massive famine.

² The One-Child policy was proposed in mid-1978, announced in early 1979, and widely implemented in 1980.

³ The Dangxiao degrees refer to a type of higher education degree, which is acquired by attending Communist Party colleges.

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